

## AUTOGNESIS, THE NOSTALGICNATURE AND SORROWFUL ATTITUDE IN OWEN AND SASOON'S VERSES

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### ABSTRACT

As it happens, there is a very intimate connection between nostalgia and the distresses and sufferings resulted by the Great War. Furthermore, the influence of such miseries and pains on almost most of the writers and poets, including Owen and Sassoon was very deep and obviously reflected in their writings. Nostalgia was eye-catching among the soldiers fighting in the First World War with its symptoms comprising a continuing melancholy, incessant thinking of home, disturbed sleep or insomnia, weakness, loss of appetite, anxiety, cardiac palpitation, stupor and fever. In point of fact, this study proposes to discuss some of Wilfred Edward Salter Owen (1893-1918) and Siegfried Loraine Sassoon's (1886-1967) poetry taking into account their nostalgic and sorrowful nature and attitude. The selected poets, both Sassoon and Owen in particular, are the ones that have presented war and its impact on human life and destiny in significant ways in their poems. They had to cope with the psychological wounds or physical injuries, apart from mental pressures, cruelty of the real life, nostalgia, sorrowfulness, miseries and pains and finally, bereavement and death itself. In point of fact, this study proposes to discuss Wilfred and Siegfried's (1886-1967) poetry taking into account their poems' nostalgic and sorrowful tone. Beyond doubt, this paper tries to depict the above mentioned world War One poet's nostalgic, distressful and sorrowful attitude and the notion of autogenesis as well.

**KEYWORDS:** Autogenesis, Nostalgia, Owen, Poetry, Sassoon, Sorrowful, World War One

### INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest historical catastrophes that failed humanity was the World War One, the so called Great War. What was going on in Europe between 1914 and 1918 was not just a story, it was among the darkest phases of the human history which cannot be forgotten. In this regard, Tim O'Brien contends that "War stories aren't always about war, per se. They aren't about bombs and bullets and military manoeuvres. They aren't about foxholes and canteens. A war story, like any good story, is finally about the human heart" (Okuyande 201). In this war for the first time chemical and biological weaponries were used and there was mass sky bombings on non-combatant targets which marked the first ethnic cleansing and genocide. In this context, in his article "The Uncanny Concept: Wilfred Owen the Traumatized and Siegfried Sassoon the Shell-Shocked" Hossein Omidi perceptively observes that:

Millions of dead and injured human beings, and more than millions of shattered and an extremely traumatic, shell shocked and deeply wounded psyche have been left by The Great War. Indeed, mankind's collective psyche remained tremendously wounded and shocked, if not permanently, for a long time. Undoubtedly, no one was safe and secure of being influenced severely by the harms and damages of the war. The growing conflicts that led to the World War One made people live in unceasing psychological stress and trauma. (1)

In this ocean of bloodshed and death the extraordinary poets Wilfred Edward Salter Owen (1893-1918) and Siegfried Loraine Sassoon (1886-1967) were introduced to the world of literature. Once more, in his work "The Extremely Satiric Sassoon and the Social Sarcastic Owen" Hossein Omidi virtuously perceives that "the impact of war on the human psyche is unavoidable and this human psyche\_ the outcome of the peculiarities of human existence\_ manifests itself in human behavior". Undoubtedly in such a horrendous condition "many poets have written about wars of which they have had no direct experience; it is the young soldiers Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon who have the firsthand experience and actual knowledge of what war can do, both to the body and to the psyche (Omidi, Colloquial:191). Additionally, in both of them the creation of poesy was somewhat unconscious rather than a conscious activity. Their traumatic and shocking trench experiences involved them emotionally, and extremely changed their career as poets. Hence, both Owen and Sassoon "seemed to be swept up in the boldness of battle" (Omidi, Formic: 2) in a way that their style of writing poetry shockingly metamorphosed. In this context, Eric Fromm in his book *The Sane Society* (1955) perceptively remarks that:

The understanding of man's psyche must be based on the analysis of man's needs stemming from the conditions of his existence and the most powerful psychic forces motivating man's behaviour stem from the conditions of his existence, the human situation. (34)

The selected poets, both Sassoon and Owen in particular, are the ones that have presented war and its impact on human life and destiny in significant ways in their poems. They had to cope with the psychological wounds or physical injuries, apart from mental pressures, cruelty of the real life, nostalgia, sorrowfulness, miseries and pains and finally, bereavement and death itself. In point of fact, this study proposes to discuss Wilfred and Siegfried's (1886-1967) poetry taking into account their poems' nostalgic and sorrowful tone. Beyond doubt, this paper tries to depict the above mentioned world War One poet's nostalgic, distressful and sorrowful attitude as well.

## DISCUSSIONS

Svetlana Boym in the book *The Future of Nostalgia* (2002), writes that "Nostalgia is a sentimentality for the past, typically for a period or place with happy personal associations" (xiii). Nostalgia in its medical usage is a kind of melancholia regarded as a significant trope in romanticism and early modernism. However, this concept has been defined in some dictionaries as "pleasure and sadness caused by remembering something from the past and wishing that you could experience it again" (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nostalgia>) ; or "the condition of being homesick" (<http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/nostalgia>); or "a sentimental yearning for the happiness of a former place or time" (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/nostalgia>). There is a very intimate connection between nostalgia and the distresses and sufferings resulted by the Great War. Nostalgia was eye-catching among the soldiers fighting in the First World War with its symptoms comprising a "continuing melancholy, incessant thinking of home, disturbed sleep or insomnia, weakness, loss of appetite, anxiety, cardiac palpitation, stupor and fever" (Hemmings 7).

In his book *Modern Nostalgia: Siegfried Sassoon, Trauma and the Second World War* (2008), Robert Hemmings detects many of the above mentioned symptoms in the soldiers suffering from the shell shock of the Great War, particularly shell shocked soldiers, such as Sassoon and Owen, at Craiglockhart War Hospital. Regarding their war poems, what can be added to the mentioned symptoms of nostalgia in their poems, as Hemmings writes, is a "spiritual homesickness for the past which confirms the impossibility of homecoming and further galvanizes the nostalgic's yearning" which is called "modern nostalgia" by him (10). According to Hemmings, numerous critics ignored Siegfried's

extremely contemplative poems and his mainly autobiographical text, after the Great War, for being “belated, nostalgic, self-indulgent” and “historically irrelevant” (2). While supporting Sassoon’s style, Paul Vlitos perceptively remarks that:

Hemmings’s response to the charges against Sassoon is twofold. Firstly, drawing on the work of scholars across a wide range of disciplines, Hemmings complicates the idea of nostalgia as simply an idealization of the past, exploring the relationship between nostalgia and war trauma both in medical history and in Sassoon’s own writings. Secondly, Hemmings examines the way in which Sassoon consciously confronts his own sense of himself as irrelevant and open to accusations of self-indulgence in particular when trying to compose poems in support of the war effort after 1939. (544)

Actually, Siegfried was under the psychological and spiritual healings of his prominent mentor Dr. Rivers at the war sanatorium. However, Robert Hemmings hints the methods in which the psychologist’s concepts of trauma and nostalgia influenced his literature even after his doctor passed away. In the meantime, the notion of “autognosis” which is a “a process by which the individual comes to self-understanding by taking account of conscious and unconscious motivations and also the environmental conditions which produced them” (545) was bestowed to him by his ethnographer. Vis-à-vis the significance of this newly adopted technique in Sassoon’s future writings and its impact on him.

Rivers developed a therapeutic treatment for patients suffering from traumatic war neuroses that he called “autognosis”, a twofold process by which an individual “learns to understand the real state of his mind” by accounting for (13) both conscious and unconscious motivations, and also the environmental conditions that have produced that state of mind. While Sassoon was wary of Freudian psychoanalytic ideas emphasizing unconscious depths, Rivers’s articulation of “autognosis” became the foundational framework for the ongoing autobiographical project that dominated Sassoon’s writing life of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. (Hemmings 14)

In early 1920s, he published some extremely sarcastic verses but in the second half, composing a verse titled “Autognosis” in 1921, he started to include the concept of “autognosis” in his writings such as “Memoirs of George Sherston” as well as the autobiographies printed between 1938 and 1945. With reference to Sassoon, his poem “Suicide in the trenches” is the best example in which the “simple soldier boy” was happily living his life in “empty joy”, sleeping “soundly through the lonesome dark”, and whistling “early with the lark.” Sassoon is portraying this joyful boy’s life and his youthful pursuits and pleasures nostalgically, reminding us and even himself of his short happy life. After joining the War, everything changes and there is no sign of youth, happiness and pleasure as he is spending a hard time in the “winter trenches, cowed and glum, / With crumps and lice and lack of rum.” The young elegant boy does not find a better way but to “put a bullet through his brain” and bring his once happy life to an end (War Poems 119).

The poet here depicts the lad’s happy life, before the war nostalgically, in the trenches horrifically, and even his “Suicide” and untimely death which is a relief and a quick step to get back his once happy life, nostalgically. The tone of his poem “To Victory” is full of nostalgia, loss of life, loss of dreams and deep desire for life and refusal of death. The persona in this poem, sorrowfully and nostalgically, wishes “the colours that were” his “joy” to “Return to greet” him but “Not in the woeful crimson of men slain”. He dreams of a greeting which is “shining as a garden” which comes along with “streaming/ Banners of dawn and sundown after rain”. His eyes are tremendously exhausted of seeing the ugly views

of horrors and miseries of the war and “greys and browns and the leafless ash”. Hence, he desires to “fill” his “gaze with blue and silver.../ roses, spires of green”. Ironically, he claims that he is not sad only he longs “for lustre”. He dreams to be a long way from “the angry guns that boom and flash”. His nostalgic outcry is expressed overtly in the following lines:

Return, musical, gay with blossom and fleetness,  
 Days when my sight shall be clear and my heart rejoice;  
 Come from the sea with breadth of approaching brightness,  
 When the blithe wind laughs on the hills with uplifted voice. (War poems 21)

In relation to Wilfred’s poetry, it is obvious that there are some elements of romantic and even modern nostalgic tone in several of his poems. “UriconiumAn Ode”, “Anthem for Doomed Youth”, “He One Remains”, and “Disabled” are among the best instances. From one hand, consciously looking back at the past, and from the other hand, unconsciously looking forward to the future, the poet depicts a nostalgic atmosphere for the readers. His poem “Disabled” tells us how the young, once strong and desired by all but now disabled, the man’s life has come to nearly nothing, total impotence, and abstinence of any kind of pleasure. Being alive in conditions in which he only is allowed to look upon other people’s lives and pleasures, he is tortured constantly continuously.

Now he has become nothing else but a full observer. Here the author develops another sentiment and mood mainly based upon the missing and impotence to enjoy little things and companies of others. The once cheerful young football player who was scoring goals and making fans, especially young girls, happy, before being disabled in the war, “sat in a wheeled chair....legless, sewn short at elbow.” Even the vivid colours of life faded away while he is “Waiting for dark and shivered in his ghastly suit of grey”, he is dressed in funeral suit. The persona longs for the “....Voices of play and pleasure after day.../Voices of boys rang saddening like hymn” but in vain.

The disabled listens every sound during his long hours of immobility, stocked in his wheelchair, having nothing else to do except observing, listening and remembering sorrowfully. His mind sliding away in dreaming how was his previous happy life which was full of joy. He dreams of the time when “town used to swing so gay...and girls glanced lovelier/ ...in the old times... before he threw away his knees.” The disabled loss of friends, girls company, and their interest for him is sadly reported which leads to a deeper loss i.e. loss of internal and external identity as a man. He misses deeply and nostalgically the ability to move freely with his body. Desperately, he is not able any more to enjoy the girls’ proximity and waists as we find “he will never feel again how slim/ Girl’s are, or how warm their subtle hands.” He is mourning and silently, for “his face” which was “younger than his youth” as once when he was a civilian before the war “an artist” was crazy to paint that lovely face. Sorrowfully, “Now, he is old; his back will never brace”. The poem continues to indicate his physical loss in a nostalgic manner:

He’s lost his colour very far from here,  
 Poured it down shell-holes till the veins can dry,  
 And half his lifetime lapsed in the hot race  
 And leap or purple spurted from his thigh. (Breen 51)

Apart from the physical and identity loss as a complete man, the nostalgic tone is dominating in these lines that: “One time he liked a blood-smear down his leg, / After the matches, carried shoulder-high. / It was after football” actually comparing to his situation now, that blood-smear is nothing; for now he does not have legs and knees and power in his back any more. Nostalgically, the mementos sweet pain full of pleasure of small wounds came to his mind when he was playing football with peers during the happy times when life was going on peacefully. When you are in the trenches and

whirled in the harshness and cruelty of war, such kind of little injuries of your previous peacetime life appears as a golden gift, comparatively with the inhuman destruction of your body now in a wheel chair. The end of such a strong young man who looked as a “god in kilts” was that:

Only a solemn man who brought him fruits  
 Thanked him; and then enquired about his soul.  
 Now, he will spend a few sick years in institutes,  
 And do what things the rules consider wise, (Breen 52)

And finally, there is no woman to look at him and to accompany him to bed for “to night he noticed how the women eyes/ passed from him to the strong men that were whole”. And his dream of being in bed with his old girls is in vain, as they will not come to put him in bed while he asks desperately and nostalgically “Why don't they come?”.

## CONCLUSIONS

As it happens, there is a very intimate connection between nostalgia and the distresses and sufferings resulted by the Great War. Furthermore, the influence of such miseries and pains on almost most of the writers and poets, including Owen and Sassoon was very deep and obviously reflected in their writings. Nostalgia was eye-catching among the soldiers fighting in the First World War with its symptoms comprising a continuing melancholy, incessant thinking of home, disturbed sleep or insomnia, weakness, loss of appetite, anxiety, cardiac palpitation, stupor and fever. In point of fact, this study proposes to discuss Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon's poetry taking into account their nostalgic and sorrowful nature and attitude. In this context, Omidi in his article “The Frustrated Siegfried and Wilfred's Aggressive and Destructive Versification” shrewdly observes that both Sassoon and Owen's “poetry is described as full of brutal, pessimistic and skeptical approach to a world they observed as shattered and drastically driven apart by the Great War and its consequences” (). With reference to Sassoon, his poem “Suicide in the trenches” is the best example in which the “simple soldier boy” was happily living his life in “empty joy”, sleeping “soundly through the lonesome dark”, and whistling “early with the lark.” Sassoon is portraying this joyful boy's life and his youthful pursuits and pleasures nostalgically, reminding us and even himself of his short happy life. The tone of his poem “To Victory” is full of nostalgia, loss of life, loss of dreams and deep desire for life and refusal of death. In relation to Wilfred's poetry, it is obvious that there are some elements of romantic and even modern nostalgic tone in several of his poems. “Uriconium An Ode”, “Anthem for Doomed Youth”, “He One Remains”, and “Disabled” are among the best instances. From one hand, consciously looking back at the past, and from the other hand, unconsciously looking forward to the future, the poet depicts a nostalgic atmosphere for the readers. His poem “Disabled” tells us how the young, once strong and desired by all but now disabled, the man's life has come to nearly nothing, total impotence, and abstinence of any kind of pleasure. Furthermore, in both of them the creation of poesy was somewhat unconscious rather than a conscious activity. Their shocking trench experiences involved them emotionally, and extremely changed their career as poets.

As a matter of truth, the selected poets, both Sassoon and Owen in particular, are the ones that have presented war and its impact on human life and destiny in significant ways in their poems. They had to cope with the psychological wounds or physical injuries, apart from mental pressures, cruelty of the real life, nostalgia, sorrowfulness, miseries and pains and finally, bereavement and death itself. In point of fact, this study proposes to discuss Wilfred and Siegfried's (1886-1967) poetry taking into account their poems' nostalgic and sorrowful tone. Beyond doubt, this paper tries to depict the above mentioned world War One poet's nostalgic, distressful and sorrowful attitude and the notion of autognosis as well.

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